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SUBJECT: MULTILINGUAL INTERNET - PROPOSAL TO DRAW UNESCO AND ICANN CLOSER TOGETHER

REFTEL: PARIS 08 0000089

¶1. Summary: On February 2, Latvian Ambassador to UNESCO and France Janis Karklins met with CDA and PAO to seek U.S. support for a proposal that would bring UNESCO's Communications and Information (CI) sector and the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) in closer partnership. Karklins' proposal would enlist UNESCO's linguistic expertise in the formalization of a standardized table of Internationalized Domain Names (IDN). This latest proposal is a follow-on to a May 2008 meeting (reftel) held at UNESCO. Action request follows. End summary.

ICANN / UNESCO PARTNERSHIP

¶2. Meeting with CDA and PAO, Ambassador Karklins outlined an ambitious plan to create a standardized table of IDNs by the end of 2009. This task would require UNESCO's linguistic expertise, he argued; while UNESCO and ICANN currently cooperate on a variety of issues related to a multilingual internet, there is no formal partnership between the two organizations. (Note: UNESCO is an observer at ICANN's Governmental Advisory Committee, and Ambassador Karklins is its chair. End note.) If the U.S. could support this, he said, Latvia might try to introduce a draft resolution at the upcoming Executive Board or General Conference.

¶3. CDA cautioned Karklins about raising such a technical issue at such a large forum; as seen last year (reftel), many countries who would be directly affected by this have very little understanding of what IDNs are, and how ICANN is seeking to standardize them. Karklins thought that perhaps a negotiated contract between UNESCO and ICANN might be a better option, as such an agreement might not need the approval of member states and could be interpreted as falling under the CI sector's current mandate.

UNESCO AS LINGUISTIC ADVOCATE

¶4. Subsequent conversations with CI's Information Society Division director Miriam Nisbet and her staff revealed a willingness on UNESCO's part to be part of such an initiative. Gathering linguistic experts from the various sectors, such as culture and science, did not seem to pose a problem, but the work would require a full-time project manager. A contract with ICANN could fund such a position. Nisbet thought that UNESCO could act as a voice for the lesser developed countries who didn't fully grasp the challenges involved, nor the implications of joining the game too late; i.e., being assigned a country top level domain name not of their choosing.

¶5. Action request: Mission seeks guidance on whether we could support such a contract or arrangement. ICANN's MOU with the Department of Commerce, which guides the transition management of the domain name system from the U.S. government to the global community, is up for renewal this year. Mission would appreciate input from the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) as well.

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